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## Faith, Tradition and Dialogue

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# Universal Theology and the Idea of Cosmic Order

Philip Novak\*

The most urgent task of theology today, some noted thinkers argue,<sup>1</sup> is to construct a universal theology of religion. '[S]uch a theology' writes A K Min, 'seeks to translate the central insights of one's own faith and those of others into an "ecumenical Esperanto," i.e., universally intelligible concepts... images and symbols based on common human experience... (the latter being) not only the source of universal theology but also its critical norm.'<sup>2</sup> It is in light of this task that the following reflection on the notion of cosmic order is undertaken.

### Universalities

Though it is possible for a reasonable person to deny the existence of God, no one can deny the existence of religion. Religion not only exists; it does so in spades. Anthropologists now readily declare that religion is a universal aspect of human culture.<sup>3</sup> Even such hard-boiled materialists as Harvard's entomologist E O Wilson proclaim that 'the predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature.'<sup>4</sup> To these vouchers for religion's universality we add another regarding its exuberance: A F C Wallace has estimated that there have been at least 100,000 religions on this planet since the emergence of homo sapiens.<sup>5</sup>

Anthropology's adumbrations of unities that lie beneath cultural diversity are in good company. The temporal and spatial dimensions disclosed by modern cosmology have transformed our once vast-seeming planet into a rather local affair. What we once saw as chasms between types of human bodies, human minds or human cultural practices have now, in the light of discoveries in biochemistry, evolutionary biology and cultural anthropology, narrowed greatly. 'All living forms... share the same essential constituents in their genetic material... (suggesting) a

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uniquely single origin of life,' writes Sir John Eccles.<sup>6</sup> 'All living peoples,' writes Clifford Geertz, 'form part of a single polytypical species and... vary anatomically and physiologically within a very narrow range.'<sup>7</sup> After giving contemporary approval to G P Murdock's forty-year old list of fifty-eight cultural universals, E O Wilson adds that 'the psychic unity of mankind... [is] a testable hypothesis.'<sup>8</sup> Geertz, more bodily, cites the 'empirically established generalization that "as far as their [inborn] capacity to learn, maintain, transmit and transform culture is concerned, different groups of homo sapiens must be regarded as equally competent." Psychic unity... is... a fact.'<sup>9</sup>

Evidence for the universality of religious behaviours and for the broad biocultural unity of humankind have made it ever more imperative for us to understand human religiousness universally as a planetary and evolutionary phenomenon. They incline us to see ~~our own faith and all the faiths of other~~ men and women, past and present, as aspects of a single, if multiform, planetary spiritual heritage. The eminent Wilfred Cantwell Smith has repeatedly urged such a perspective, insisting that it is not in fantasy but in empirical fact that we can now speak of a 'single religious history of mankind,' and speak, too, of our own traditions in terms of an Islamic or Buddhist or Jewish *strand* in this single history. 'Our new task,' writes Smith, 'is to interpret intellectually the cosmic significance of human life generically.'<sup>10</sup>

To do this we must leave the valley of theological particularism. For how can we discuss, for example, the relationships between Isvara, Yahweh, Al-Haqq, Ahura-Mazda, Sunyata, Wakan-Tanka, Ganesha and Christ in languages that are themselves the products of centuries of theo-cultural inbreedings, without being undermined by the subtextual conflict over whose cultural values have priority?

Anthropology's admission of cultural universals prompts us to seek a theological universal, a tract of conceptual land belonging to everyone and owned by no one, where universes of discourse can meet and make common cause.<sup>11</sup> This would not be a flat uniformity, but rather a common *conceptual* ground, necessarily general and even vague to aid discourse. We seek a theological universal in a common *function* of God and God-Equivalents amid the many permutations they take within cultural symbol systems. We will argue that one of the common functions of God-Equivalents is both to give dense expression to and to engender man's felt sense of embedded within a Cosmic Order or Will, a noumenal Dynamism in right relation to which s/he finds deliverance from perceived ill. We seek in the notion of cosmic order not a lowest common denominator but a highest common factor.



### The Ideas of Cosmic Order and Cosmic Will

We have become the beings that we are largely because of our talent for making meaning. 'The drive to make sense out of experience,' says Clifford Geertz, 'is... as real and pressing as the more familiar biological needs,' and man's symbolic activities are not disguised expressions of some deeper thing but rather precisely what they seem to be: 'attempts to provide orientation for an organism which cannot live in a world it is unable to understand.'<sup>12</sup> The ultimate basis for making meaning has long been the assumption - however dimly perceived and minimally articulated - that the larger world in which particular meanings are made (or found) is itself a meaningful order.

What we know about primal religions suggests that even when our aspiration reached no further than salvation from drought, an unsuccessful hunt, or childlessness, deliverance from these ills was sought always in reference to a larger, cosmic order, vaguely conceived perhaps, feared rather than pondered perhaps, but nevertheless an order which encompassed us, whose power(s) enveloped and transcended us. Frederick Turner assures us that:

Individual vision quests, vigils, communal ceremonies, even the recitation of tribal legends and myths, are all means of continually revivifying that necessary sense of belonging to or being merged with an encompassing order of things. In all these situations the individual will is "captured" and submitted to a greater power... (T)hat is why the heroes and heroines of myth are not conquerors but are instead those who submit, bending their energies in accord with greater forces.<sup>13</sup>

The sense of an all-encompassing order, omnipresent in archaic myths, underwent a significant step toward conscious articulation in Mesopotamia somewhere in the middle of the 4th millennium B.C.E. There for the first time in human history, as a result of systematic and long-standing observations of regularities in the heavens, we proffered the idea of a vast cosmic order, cyclically renewed, with which it would be prudent for man to put his social and political orders in accord. Joseph Campbell has called this momentous event 'the most important and far reaching cultural mutation... in the history of the human race,' not because the germ of the idea was radically new, but because the elaborated form it took was destined to spread and take hold in Egypt around 2800 B.C.E., in India and Crete by 2500 B.C.E., in China by 1500 B.C.E., in America by 1200 B.C.E., and later at varying times in Meso and South America. Indeed, declares Campbell, packing a lifetime of comparative mythological study into his wallop:

it has actually been from [this] one great variously inflected and developed literate world-heritage that *all* of the philosophies, theologies, mysticisms and

sciences in our lives derive. They are in origin one; one also in their heritage of symbols; different, however, in their histories, interpretations, applications, emphases and local aims.<sup>14</sup>

Let us, then, briefly note the recurrence of this motif - a Cosmic Order or Will with which it is prudent for human beings, both individually and politically, to put themselves in alignment of harmony - in some of the world's most enduring religious traditions.

It can hardly be denied, for example, that one of the great leitmotifs of Jewish history is the discernment of God's all-embracing Order and Law, and the alignment of the human will thereto. The whole of Jewish sacred history can be conceived as a story of successful and unsuccessful attempts at such an alignment. Torah is to be studied and practiced so as to conform oneself to the Eternal Order. 'Do His will as if it were thy will,' says Rabbi Gamliel, 'that He may do thy will as if it were His will.'<sup>15</sup>

The story could hardly be much different in Christianity or Islam, religions which branched from the same Abrahamic tree. True to his Jewish faith, Jesus of Nazareth sought above all to be in alignment with his Father's Cosmic Will and taught others to do the same. For Paul and Augustine, the essential quality of Christian spiritual life depended upon the degree to which the human will was unified because wholly dedicated

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to a higher End, or divided and dispersed among various ends and desires. It is difficult to imagine a description of the Christian ideal more often uttered than 'not my will, but Thine.' For the Christian mystics it is a constant refrain.

Islam, of course, takes its very name from perennial notion of conformation of the human will to a Divine, Cosmic order, for 'Islam' means surrender or submission - the surrender of one's will to the Will of Allah, to the Order which assures the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the unrighteous, which keeps the sun and moon and the stars in their course. One who does so submit, or even sincerely wishes to submit, her will, is considered by Muslims to be one of them.

In Greece and in Asia the notion of a Cosmic Order or Encompassing Will was conceived of in a decidedly less personal way than in the Abrahamic traditions. The Greeks, as Cornford has pointed out, considered their gods subordinate to a higher principle of cosmic order, alternately Moira (Fate), Dike (Law or Justice), and, in Heraclitus' case, the Logos. Such conceptions of an order in which man is embedded were the precursors of the Platonic and Aristotelian versions of the cosmic order which, in various amalgams with Judo-Christian ideas, formed the backbone of western metaphysical conceptions down to the 17th century. In other words, Western philosophers for two millennia took it as axiomatic that the self's quest for meaning was fundamentally impeded unless its activity in the world bore a relation to the eternal order of being. In fact, it rarely occurred to them to ponder the nature of the self apart from the notion of such an order. Says the noted contemporary historian of philosophy Charles Taylor: 'On the traditional view, the notion of a subject coming to self-presence and clarity in the absence of any cosmic order, or in ignorance of and unrelated to the cosmic order, is utterly senseless.'<sup>16</sup>

In the ancient Vedic religion of India, *rta* was the name given to the fundamental ordering principle of the universe, the central Norm of existence to which even the gods were subordinate. 'From *rta*,' John Koller informs us, 'flow the various rhythms of existence. It is *rta* that directs the emergence, dissolution and re-emergence of existence at the cosmic level and that gives to each thing and event its own structure and nature.'<sup>17</sup> The task of remaining in harmony with *rta*, for which participation in the sacrificial celebration (*yajna*) was the chief vehicle, was basic to the Vedic ethos.

Closely akin to *rta* and ultimately replacing it, was the notion of *dharma*,<sup>18</sup> a multivalent notion which became the common property of religions that sprouted on Indian soil. *Dharma* derives from the root *dhrr*, meaning to support, bear or sustain. It is the principle of order that

sustains both the universe and society, requiring of human being actions appropriate to both realms. To carry out the demands of both one's social *dharma* and the universal *dharma* is, in the later polymorphous Hindu tradition, the key to human fulfilment.

*Dharma* qua cosmic order is also of incalculable importance to buddhists, naming for them the moral order of the universe in conformity with which deliverance is found. *Dharma* - not *Nirvana* - is, at least for Therevada Buddhism, the concept most analogous to God. *Dharma* is the cosmic order whose two 'gears', the moral law of karma and the casual principle of dependent arising turn both the wheel of life and the wheel of liberation. It is simply wrong to hold that *dharma* refers solely to the set of teachings proffered by Gautama Buddha. The importance of this point, the frequency with which it is missed, and the frequency with which it is consequently and wrongly supposed that Buddhism is an anomaly when it comes to the notion of an Order of Things by which man is encompassed and in harmony with which he can find deliverance, convince us that a lengthy citation is not out of order. We quote Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

It would puncture the whole Buddhist system of thought... to suppose that the Dharma is... something he constructed. He did not concoct this; he discovered it... The Dharma that he taught does not owe its validity... to the fact that he was... wise; on the contrary, he became... wise... because he awoke to its pre-existent truth... All else is evanescent. But the Saddharma, the True Law, is eternal... There is, ...he proclaimed, a final truth in accordance with which if a man lives he will be saved. If the universe consisted only in the flux of *samsara*... if there were no eternal Dharma, then man could not possibly save himself... It is living according to Dharma, the pre-existing law, that saves. The decision so to live is man's own; but the fact that living so brings salvation is prior to man, independent of man. And the confidence that it will work... is based on a confidence in the very universe where such a truth obtains... is the 'good news' that the Buddha preached, and that his movement carried half across the world.<sup>19</sup>

The Buddhist gospel travelled to China where its eventual success was aided by the fact that *tao* had long been the Chinese equivalent of *dharma*. Confucius urged his students to align themselves with the *tao* of heaven, and for the Taoists, *tao* was used to name both the order of the universe and the way of life in accordance with that order. When one's will is in harmony with the Way, one can expect its power (*te*) to guide and to heal.

Yahweh's will, God's will, the will of Allah, *dike*, *rta*, *dharma* and *tao*: manifold differences in connotation obtain among these various signs, yet they cannot overshadow the fact that each sign points to a putative Dynamic Order to which the human will is advised to be attuned.



Our review has been suggestive only, and since available space precludes greater detail, we appeal to authority to conclude this section. When Clifford Geertz attempts to place in a single generalization the functional essence of mankind's diverse religious behaviors, he turns precisely to the notion of cosmic order. 'Religion,' says Geertz, 'tunes human actions to a view of the cosmic order and projects images of a cosmic order onto the plane of human existence.'<sup>20</sup> God and God-Equivalents, then, function as a kind of shorthand, indeed Symbols, for announcing and evoking a felt sense of this order.

### **The Nature of Religious Responsiveness**

The abstraction 'Cosmic Order' cannot replace the vivid God-images that suffuse believing hearts. Even if it were a useful 'highest common factor,' perennial questions would still arise to confront it. Does it answer human prayers? Does it allow evil and why? Nevertheless, while many such questions remain, and while many believers would find themselves unable to relate themselves to a bare 'Cosmic Order' until further attired, it may not be idle to suggest that this very inability might be in part the result of centuries of theological presumption wherein God-ideas have been conceptually over-determined. It seems possible that the future of God-talk may indeed partake of a return to generality, to apophatic humility, to the liberating acknowledgement of ineluctable Mystery.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, 'Religious life,' W C Smith has said, 'is at heart a matter not of creed but of character and conduct.'<sup>22</sup> Though we can do many things with mind and tongue, we can do far fewer with existential decision and moral choice. Patterns of human action are not as protean as the productions of the speculative intellect and the religious imagination. While the intellect is a scalpel that loves to cut, and to name whatever it cuts, the human will is a blunter instrument with a more limited vocabulary. It is therefore in the domains of human willing - in morality and faith - that we must seek our common humanity.

When we survey human societies we see that the moral sensibilities of peoples have, in stark contract to the luxuriant variety of their Gods, been relatively one. Always and everywhere human groups have valued courage over cowardice, honesty over falseness, compassion over egotism, justice over injustice - the list continues indefinitely. Moral ideals carry a deeper family resemblance than do metaphysical constructs and eschatological visions. It seems, then, an error to assume that religion as lived is dependent for its essential qualities on the highly ramified theological discourse of particular traditions. If it were so, morality would be as diverse as theology and it clearly is not. This is what Smith means,



I think, when he says that '[T]he world needs not a theory of comparative religion, but a morality of it.'<sup>23</sup>

Asked to describe their faith, people routinely give an account of *what* they believe. Faith, however, is more a matter of *how* one believes. Its essential character has more to do with the quality of one's response to the Transcendent than it does with one's presumptions about the Transcendent's nature. This is the view of faith urged by thinkers like Kierkegaard who found that faith's authenticity had more to do with the quality of willing involved in it than with its supposed object,<sup>24</sup> by Tillich who defined faith as 'the centered movement of the whole personality toward something of ultimate meaning and significance',<sup>25</sup> clearly emphasizing human response over theological definition, and by W C Smith who insists that it is the intentional quality of lived faith, not the theological object of that intending, that reveals hidden unity of human faith. Smith caps his point with an etymological lesson: the Christian *credo* originally meant not an assent to propositions but to an all-encompassing involvement of the personality, while *sraddha*, faith in the Hindu-Buddhist lexicon, is similarly open-ended, with no particular object defining it. The root meanings of both *credo* and *sraddha* are 'a placing of the heart.'<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite the manifold ways in which the world's faithful have been conditioned to *talk* about their faith, its inner reality - a certain depth, continuity and coherence of response to the Eternal - everywhere displays a profound family resemblance.

### The Future of God

'If God did not exist,' Voltaire once quipped, 'it would be necessary to invent him.' We now know even if God does exist, invention is still necessary if only in the sense of finding new ways, amidst ceaseless cultural change of speaking of the Transcendent. We cannot foresee what forms our spiritual yearning will take in the human future, but if that yearning has heretofore always been closely linked to the notion of cosmic order - as this paper has suggested - then perhaps in the two elements of that phrase, 'cosmic' and 'order', we find two guidelines (certainly not new) for the planetary future of God-talk.

First, God-ideas must remain cosmic, that is to say, transcendent to any recognizable human person, group or institution. Depth psychology has given us adequate warning about the human passion for transference, about our fundamental craving for an emotional unity with something beyond the self. But if this hunger, which is in reality our primordial human relatedness to the Eternal, is fed by the cult of the state or the hero-personality, the growth of base and destructive idolatries is assured. 'God' must always name a true beyond; reached for but never grasped,

an encompassing cosmic context that forever stands above our individual and collective frailties.

Second, our God-ideas must continue to embody the notion of an order of being which provides telos, a sense of direction, for humankind's conscious evolution. One of comparative religion's most precious discoveries has been that of the soteriological structure common to the great faiths. Those faiths, writes John Hick:

offer a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better one. They each speak in their different ways of the... deluded character of our present human existence in its... unchanged condition. ...They also proclaim... that the Ultimate, the Real... with which our present existence is out of joint, is good, or gracious, or otherwise to be sought and responded to... completing the soteriological structure, they each offer their own way to the Ultimate - through faith in response to divine grace; or through total self-giving to God; or through the spiritual discipline... which leads to...liberation. In each case, salvation... consists of a new and limitlessly better quality of existence which comes about in the transition from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.<sup>27</sup>

The journey from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness - this is the human telos, so ancient and so new, which the cosmic order makes possible and toward which God-ideas at their best help to point us.

## Notes

1. W C Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, Philadelphia: Westminster 1981 and London: Macmillan 1981; L Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, Orbis 1987; John Hick's many volumes, including *Death and Eternal Life*, which he calls a 'global theology of death' and *An Interpretation of Religion*, seem similarly oriented.
2. A K Min, 'The Challenge of Radical Pluralism', *Cross Currents*, Fall 1988, p.268.
3. Eg. A F C Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View*, New York: Random House 1966, p.4.
4. Edward O.Wilson, *On Human Nature*, New York: Bantam 1982, p.176.
5. A F C Wallace, op. cit., p.3.
6. Sir John Eccles and Daniel N Robinson, *The Wonder of Being Human*, New Science Library: Boston and London 1985, p.10.
7. Clifford Geertz, 'The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind,' *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books 1973, p.69.
8. E O Wilson, op. cit., pp.22, 48. G.P.Murdock's list of cultural universals, given in Wilson, is from Murdock, 'The Common Denominator in Culture,' in Ralph Linton, ed., *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, Columbia University Press 1945, pp.124-42.
9. Geertz, op.cit., p.69. The quotation within the quotation is from M Mead, 'Cultural Determinants of Behavior,' in A Roe and G Simpson, eds., *Culture and Behavior*, New Haven 1958.



10. W C Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, Philadelphia: Westminster 1981, and London: Macmillan 1981, p.44 and p.86f, italics mine.
11. Thinkers of the stature of John Cobb and Raimon Panikkar warn us that the pretension to an impartial perspective independent of all particular traditions is not only arrogant but impossible. It is impossible *now*, but arrogant only if we attempt to force its birth before its time. Can anyone declare it *a priori* impossible? To say that the world's current cultural-linguistic wholes are forever fixed and impermeable is to repeat the mistake of those who once insisted that animal forms were created once and immutably by divine fiat. Though a single 'world culture' is distant at best, it seems wrong not to entertain its possibility.
12. C Geertz, 'Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,' *Antioch Review*, 1957, p.338.
13. Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press 1983, pp.237, 9-10.
14. J Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, Princeton University Press 1974, p.72 & 74f. Italics his.
15. *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers (Pirque Aboth)*, ed. and trans. Charles Taylor, New York: Ktav Publishing House 1969, II.4, p.29.
16. C Taylor, *ibid.*, p.6.
17. John Koller, *The Indian Way*, New York: Macmillan 1982, p.52.
18. Actually, it was replaced by two notions, *dharma* and *karma*. Koller explains: 'Karma refers to the interconnectedness of events and dharma refers to the normative dimensions of this interconnected reality.' (Koller, *op.cit.*, p.63).
19. W C Smith, *Faith and Belief*, Princeton University Press 1979, p.27f.
20. Geertz, 'Religion' in A C Lehman and J C Myers, eds., *Magic, Witchcraft and Religion*, Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Co. 1989, p.15.
21. In speaking of the future of God, A F C Wallace, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, suggests that "[p]erhaps... it matters far less what the metaphysical definition of this entity should be than what its inherent purposes are. A certain flexibility of meaning, a friendly ambiguity in the positive characteristics of... [God] will permit its cathexis more readily than would a sharp and precise definition. (Wallace, *op.cit.*, p.268).
22. W C Smith, *op.cit.*, p.145.
23. W C Smith, *op.cit.*, p.145.
24. See especially Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*.
25. P Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, New York: Harper and Row 1957, p.106.
26. W C Smith, *Faith and Belief*, p.60ff.
27. J Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1983, p.3.